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RUEHLM/AMEMBASSY COLOMBO 0387

RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA 0409

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RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL 0846

RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 0894

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RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 0362

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STATE FOR SCA/CEN (NICOLAIDIS) AND SCA/PPD (BLOCKER/KAMP)

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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN SHOWCASES INTERNATIONAL SCHOLARSHIP AT
ZAMAHSHARY CONFERENCE

SUMMARY

11. (U) A host government-organized conference dedicated to Islamic scholar Mahmyt Zamahshary from May 23 to 25 was surprisingly close to a legitimate international scholarly conference, despite the usual ceremonial trappings of such conferences under late President Niyazov. The event's ceremonial propaganda focused on new President Berdimuhamedov, but did not overshadow the interaction of international scholars gathered for the event. Meanwhile, Iranian diplomats and scholars played leading roles at this and other host-government sponsored cultural events in May. End Summary.

OPEN SCHOLARSHIP AND DEBATE IN TURKMENISTAN

12. (U) For three days the conference's six committees of scholars from 23 different countries presented academic articles on various aspects of Mahmyt Zamahshary, an 11th century Islamic writer and scholar who lived within the borders of present-day Turkmenistan and is now being portrayed as a major Turkmen national and cultural hero. The conference began with an introductory letter from the president but from then on focused on academic pursuits. The chairman of the conference and director of the Miras Cultural Center, Annagurban Ashyrov, gave an opening presentation devoid of nationalistic rhetoric and called for unified, international academic study of Zamahshary. After each opening day speech by Turkmen and international scholars, Ashyrov gave intelligent critical commentary also free of nationalistic rhetoric.

13. (U) The diplomatic corps was ordered to attend at the last moment, per usual practice. International participants sponsored fully by the host government admitted some degree of self-censorship in preparing their initial papers because of fear of the host government denying future visas. But few felt constrained once they arrived. An American and a Turkish scholar stated that they had published "careful criticism" of the regime before. No one mentioned a need to coordinate their research results with Ruhnama doctrine. Nor was anyone confronted by the host government about what they presented during the conference. Between-sessions discussion between international scholars, local scholars and government officials was abundant, free, and good-natured. (Note: local academics are routinely warned away from foreigners and interaction is often restrained or scripted. End Note.) Post's representative witnessed a heated debate between an Iranian and Indian scholar on interpretation of Islamic doctrine. The host government organized field trips to the historic sites of Izmuk Shir

and Kone Urgench for all participants, which aided the air of debate.

¶14. (U) Each committee, mostly chaired by international scholars, gave final reports calling for further unified study of Zamahshary, particularly through expanded translation efforts of his texts and scholarly criticism of his work, and coordinated research between scholars. (Comment: Scholarship in this field is running in parallel language streams of Russian, English, Farsi, and Arabic. Language and political barriers have prevented the merging of these streams into a shared debate and even access to some of the author's works. The host government stated a desire for Turkmenistan to act as a neutral nexus point for future scholarship; it was unclear if this meant scholarship in Turkmen language should take priority. End Comment.) Annagurban Ashyrov admitted that Turkmen scholarship in this area was very weak because of Soviet suppression of non-Russian culture, and acknowledged the importance of working with international researchers to gain ground.

¶15. (U) Scholars and local authorities had an overwhelmingly positive impression of the conference and excitedly traded business cards and contact information for future work in or about Turkmenistan. Several stated that the range of scholars present was unique and allowed them to connect with others doing parallel research in different countries. An American scholar, Victoria Clement, who has attended other, similar host government-sponsored conferences, professed to be shocked at the comparative quality of this event. However, attendees remarked that presentation time and technological support (televisions, projectors, power point, etc) were insufficient, and that the lack of air-conditioning in government-provided transport was exhausting.

OLD HABITS

ASHGABAT 00000661 002 OF 002

¶16. (U) Many aspects of the conference reminded participants that they were still in Turkmenistan. Each major event or site movement in the conference was greeted with a grandiose display of "Turkmen culture," including bread-giving and dancing, neither of which is authentically Turkmen, but more a relic of Soviet times. The main conference hall during opening and closing ceremonies was filled with what appeared to be carefully conscripted observers. Men in black suits with ambiguous roles prowled around, keeping curious locals away. Diplomats and scholars alike were subtly discouraged from deviating from approved areas even during breaks and site tours. However, participants did manage to sneak off and could be seen exploring the bazaars and streets of Dashoguz with great curiosity. (Note: Embassy's representative was followed by security personnel when he left the hotel to visit the local American Corner, according to a non-U.S. member of the diplomatic corps.)

¶17. (U) Displays, quotations on billboards, and propaganda speeches highlighted Berdimuhamedov. While pictures of Niyazov could still be found on numerous buildings in Dashoguz, all restaurants, buses, roads, and rooms used for the event featured gigantic pictures of Berdimuhamedov. (Comment: The attending representative visited Dashoguz four days prior for another event, during which he noted the absence of the new president's picture. Locals stated that there was a flurry of activity May 21 as local government workers replaced Niyazov photos with those of Berdimuhamedov across the welayat. End Comment.) Turkmenistan's Democratic Party Chairman Onjuk Musayev closed the conference with a brief, flattering presentation of Berdimuhamedov's recently released book on healthcare reform.

IRANIAN CULTURAL INITIATIVES

¶18. (SBU) The Iranian mission's high profile presence included keynote speaking roles in this conference, the May 16 Constitutional Conference, and the May 21 Magtymguly Scholarly conference. The Iranian ambassador and at least one other Iranian diplomat were present at each event. The Iranian ambassador and cultural attach

attended the Zamahshary Conference, whereas most missions sent at most their deputy chief of mission or a junior level officer. Iran's scholarly delegation was second only to that of Turkmenistan.

COMMENT

¶9. (SBU) The freer debate within the conference does not challenge the regime, and is thus a weak indicator of the host government's commitment to greater academic openness. Nonetheless, the conference provides a valuable networking opportunity that encourages local officials to press for more scholarly exchange. The aesthetic and rhetorical references to President Berdimuhamedov suggest that he is aping Niyazov's style, perhaps out of a lack of experience with alternatives. Nonetheless, the new order leaves gaps for criticism of current and past practice, a first step toward greater openness in the field of scholarly historical research. End Comment.

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